

Using Brand Websites to Build Brands

Online: A Product versus Service Brand Comparison

WENYU DOU

City University of Hong
Kong
mkwydou@cityu.edu.hk

SANDEEP

KRISHNAMURTHY

University of
Washington, Bothell
sandeep@u.washington.edu

This study analyzes important content, function, and design elements of brand sites along six dimensions: text information, multimedia information, interface design, loyalist support, promotion synergy, and interactivity. A total of 219 brand websites for a product category (i.e., drinks and candies) and a service category (i.e., accounting firms) are examined. Results indicate that accounting firms treat their brand sites as corporate-image building vehicles and virtual information sources while drinks and candies firms use entertaining design elements to build customer relationships through greater interaction. Companies may be underutilizing elements related to interactivity, cultivating loyal customers, and supporting cross-channel promotions.

BRANDING ON THE INTERNET has received increasing attention in recent years as mainstream advertisers show growing interest in utilizing the online medium for building and extending their valuable brands online (New Media Age, 2004). A unique advertising approach for enhancing brand equity in the online environment is the design of dedicated websites for brands (Goldsmith and Lafferty, 2002), also called "brand sites." The concept of brand sites has been embraced by both physical goods manufacturers and service providers (Heldal, Sjøvold, and Heldal, 2004), such as www.tide.com (the website for Tide detergent) or www.larsonallen.com (the website for Larson, Allen, Weishair & Co., LLP, an accounting firm).

Brand sites differ in their objectives (Holland and Baker, 2001). While some sites focus on educating consumers about the brand, others may be purchase-oriented, e.g., with online coupon distribution mechanism, store locator. Still others utilize brand sites to deepen consumer relationships by facilitating user-to-user interaction or online communities—e.g., Tide.com includes a community section for consumers interested in fabric care. Leading industry members now recognize the importance of brand sites and see them as spaces to increase quality of reach, build deeper

customer relationships, and influence the sales cycle (Flores, 2004).

Evidence on the efficacy of brand websites in building brands is starting to emerge from both academic and industry studies. Ha and Chan-Olmsted (2004), in a study on a national random sample of U.S. internet users, found that users' visits of brand websites for cable television networks had a significant effect on brand image. Another CRM Metrix (2003) survey found that consumers rated brand websites as the option that gives them the best ability to learn about their favorite brands. Specifically, 54.6 percent of the respondents chose brand websites over other advertising means. The same survey also found that 75 percent of the respondents planned to increase the frequency of their visits to brand sites in the future.

Despite the prevalence of brand sites and their efficacy in building brands online, there exists little guidance on how brand sites should be structured in terms of content, function, and design so as to deliver the maximum branding impact—Ghose and Dou (1998) is an important exception. This is unfortunate as content types, site functions, and design formats are the fundamental building blocks of effective online customer

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interface (Rayport and Jaworski, 2001). Thus, the main objective of our study is to identify and analyze the important aspects of the content, function, and design of brand sites. Another objective of our investigation is to compare the usage of brand sites by the manufacturers of physical goods to that of service firms. This perspective of inquiry is important because many service firms have embraced the internet as a new marketing channel (Deans et al., 2003), and the literature shows that service advertising is considerably different from product advertising (e.g., Grove, Carlson, and Dorsch, 2002; Stafford, 2005).

We approach this investigation from three interrelated theoretical perspectives. First, we build on the branding (e.g., Batra, Myers, and Aaker, 1996) and internet advertising (e.g., Singh and Dalal, 1999) literature to identify the key elements of brand sites that may contribute to their branding effectiveness. Second, we employ service advertising theories to understand how brand sites may work differently for physical products as opposed to services. Major challenges in service branding include intangibility (Mattila, 2000) and higher level of perceived risk (e.g., Lovelock and Wright, 1999). On the internet, the risk perception of service brands may be even higher than in the physical world—this is because traditional service quality cues such

as tangibility of facilities, employees, and equipment are unobservable on the internet (Yang, Peterson, and Cai, 2003). As a result, the content, function, and design strategies used by these two types of companies in brand sites are likely to differ as well. Specifically, we posit that service firms will rely more on brand site features that can lend tangibility to their offerings (e.g., pictures of employees).

Third, we supplement traditional advertising and branding theories with the Information Architecture Theory (Rosenfeld and Morville, 2002) developed in the Information Science field. In a nutshell, Information Architecture Theory stipulates that the structure and organization of websites influence how web users process site information and perform site functions (e.g., search). This particular theory is relevant for our investigation because internet users process information differently in the nonlinear, hypertextual brand sites (Winer et al., 1997) than they do in traditional media such as TV or print (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). As a result, traditional advertising theories should be augmented with a theory in hypertext processing (i.e., Information Architecture Theory).

Our topic of investigation is important for several reasons. First and foremost, brand sites provide an excellent platform to foster genuine relationships with potential and actual customers based on a

continuous dialogue (Christodoulides and Chernatony, 2004). Second, brand sites are increasingly being used as preferred destination sites for other forms of advertising, such as TV advertisements, banner advertisements, email advertisements, print advertisements, etc. For instance, in a summer promotion campaign, Snapple asked consumers to collect Snapple bottle caps and redeem them at Snapple.com for unusual collectable treasures (Hein, 2003). Lastly, the establishment of brand sites gives advertisers greater control over the advertising medium and provides them with greater flexibility in managing advertising online. Advertisers are able to track effectiveness of marketing investments by studying traffic to the sites, for instance.

Toward this goal of identifying and analyzing the important aspects of brand sites, we designed a web content analysis study that examined the content, function, and design features of 219 branding websites—in two product categories selected from the Hoover's Company Database: drinks and candies manufacturers and accounting firms.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research questions

In this study, the research questions that we focus on are:

- RQ1: What types of information are commonly provided in brand sites?
- RQ2: How are brand sites utilizing multimedia content online?
- RQ3: How are brand sites used to cultivate and support loyalists of a brand?
- RQ4: How are brand sites used to support firms' other marketing programs?

- RQ5: What types of website structural formats are commonly used by brand sites?
- RQ6: How are brand sites utilizing various forms of interactivity functions?
- RQ7: How do brand sites for products and services differ in terms of content, function, and design?

Sample

This web content analysis study first utilized the Hoover's Company Database to select two industry types: physical products (drinks and candies) and services (accounting firms). All companies in these two categories were initially included. Then, a sample pruning method was used to remove companies that belonged to one or more of the following categories: (1) companies that have many separate brand sites; (2) companies' brand sites that were not functional, as listed by Hoovers; and (3) companies' brand sites that were hosted under other companies' domain names. In some cases, a few companies with different company names but same brand sites were consolidated to avoid overreporting. After pruning of the initial census sample, 90 drinks and candies manufacturers and 120 accounting firms were retained.

Coding sheet development

Due to the extensive scope of this coding study that examines the entire brand site instead of just the homepage of the site, a series of steps were taken so as to develop a comprehensive and feasible coding sheet. First, the researchers conducted an extensive literature search on internet advertising, branding, and online interface design. A preliminary list of the coding items emerged as a result of this process. Next, the initial list of items was evaluated by a marketing researcher in the field of internet marketing and an MIS researcher in the

field of electronic interface design. The initial list was then modified and expanded based on their input. Third, one of the researchers engaged in extensive browsing of brand sites in related categories (e.g., energy bars, law firms). This note-taking process supplemented and modified the initial coding inventory. Lastly, the revised coding sheet was given to a graduate student who was unaware of study goals and asked to browse five brand sites based on the list. Minor problems with the list were identified and further modified. The finalized coding sheet shown in Table 1 includes six major categories—*text*, *multimedia*, *design*, *loyalist support*, *promotion synergy*, and *interactivity*. Each of the 50 coding items as shown in Table 1 is accompanied by detailed explanations or an example.

Procedure

Due to the extensive amount of coding work involved, one of the researchers, a graduate student, and two undergraduate students who took a course in internet marketing were involved. All student coders were thoroughly trained on how to code brand sites accurately through detailed instructions, repeated pilot testing, and prompt feedback.

While coding saved webpages was the preferred approach in recent website content analysis studies (e.g., Macias and Lewis, 2003–2004), it was not used in this study due to the large sample size and the extensive hardware and bandwidth requirements of saving every page and file (including large size video files) to the local hard drive. Instead, each pair of coders coded a set (e.g., three) of websites on the same date using the same high-speed internet lines. The synchronous coding task and similar task environment thus ensured that the coded sites were virtually the same.

As coding the entire site is the only way through which a complete under-

standing of the site can be achieved (Macias and Lewis, 2003–2004), the coders were instructed to thoroughly explore every page of each brand site and also pay attention to meaningful symbols as well. Typically, smaller scale brand sites took 5–10 minutes to code while complicated brand sites could take 30 minutes or more to code. The coding process lasted from April 2004 to July 2004.

Reliability

Two pairs of coders independently coded the total set of 219 sites with each pair coding about half of the sites. Inter-coder reliability was measured using the coefficient of reliability (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico, 1998). The overall coefficient of reliability was 86.4 percent, with a high of 99.1 percent for Company Information to a low of 75.3 percent for Subbrand Content. A few variables had relatively low inter-coder reliabilities—notably, Picture of Customers (77.62 percent), Download (78.5 percent), and Customer Education (79.5 percent). Because the overall average is above the minimal 80 percent agreement level, it is considered to be good for this comprehensive study that examined a total of 50 coding items. The two pairs of coders resolved all disagreements, and 100 percent agreement was achieved.

RESULTS

In analyzing the data, we first looked at the usage frequency of the 50 coded items. We then conducted two-sample Z-test of proportions to evaluate whether the usage frequency of various content, function, and design features differed between brand sites for two different industry types: drinks and candies manufacturers and accounting firms. The results are summarized in Tables 2–7.

In addition, we applied multiple correspondence analysis to gain additional

TABLE 1
Brand Sites Coding Sheet

| Major Category | Variables | Codes | Notes |
|--------------------|---|------------|---|
| Text content | About company | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | About product offering | 1 yes 0 no | Could be service for service firms |
| | Testimonials from customers | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Store locator | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Subbranded content | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., Tide Stain Detectives, A Gynome's eye view at Travelocity |
| | Consumer education: Informing beyond the product/service | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., Kotex.com offers information related to teen issues |
| | Presence of FAQ | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Presence of multiple modes of contact | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., email, phone, online form |
| | New content | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., "what's new" or time sensitive information such as Easter |
| | Investor information | 1 yes 0 no | Information for the company's investors |
| Multimedia content | Privacy information | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Career info | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Press coverage/awards | 1 yes 0 no | Media report or awards |
| | Use videos to demonstrate product | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Makes available videos of the company's TV advertisements | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Picture of employees | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Picture of customers | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Audios | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., welcome message |
| | Picture of product endorser | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Picture of product | 1 yes 0 no | |
| Loyalist support | Animated image or text | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Fan club | 1 yes 0 no | An organization for product enthusiasts |
| | Brand story/history | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Brand souvenirs | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., Pepsi t-shirt |
| | Recommend to a friend | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Bulletin board | 1 yes 0 no | |

(continued)

TABLE 1 (cont'd)

| Major Category | Variables | Codes | Notes |
|---|---|-------------------|---|
| Design | In site search box | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Site map | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Navigation structure | 1 Top | Metaphor (e.g., at Barbie.com; click a balloon will bring you to a party section) |
| | | 2 Left | |
| | | 3 Top/left | |
| | | 4 Right | |
| | | 5 Metaphor | |
| | | 6 Middle or right | |
| | | 7 Other | |
| | Use of click-on drop down menu | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Use Flash intro | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Pop-up advertisement upon loading | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Online shopping functionality | 1 yes 0 no | |
| Synergy with other communication vehicles | Brand logo throughout the site | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Updatedness of website | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., new offerings, Spring clearance, etc. |
| | Entry for promotions, prizes | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Provide online coupon or discount | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Information supporting sponsorship | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., Indy 500 racing at Valvoline.com |
| | Information supporting publicity coverage | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., community involvement, media |
| | Join to receive email newsletter | 1 yes 0 no | |
| Interactivity | Online games | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Option of downloading a program | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., screen saver, wall paper, trial version program |
| | New-product suggestions from customers | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Online contact form | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Feedback form/survey/poll | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Online job placement | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., online resume submission |
| | Online problem diagnostics for use of product | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Personalized option | 1 yes 0 no | e.g., My Tide at tide.com |
| | Electronic post card | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Virtual reality for product demo | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Recommendation agent based customer stated preference | 1 yes 0 no | |
| | Live customer support (e.g., real time chat) | 1 yes 0 no | |

TABLE 2

Distribution of Different Categories of Text Information across Industries

| Information Type | Energy Drinks and Candy N = 90 | Accounting Firms N = 129 | p-Value of Two-Sample z-Test of Proportions |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Products/offerings | 100% | 100% | N/A ^a ; both 100% |
| Company | 95.56% | 100% | 0.114 |
| Multiple modes of contact | 91.11% | 79.84% | 0.023** |
| FAQ | 52.22% | 13.95% | <0.0001*** |
| Privacy information | 51.11% | 40.31% | 0.114 |
| Press coverage | 44.44% | 63.57% | 0.0051*** |
| Store locator | 42.22% | N/A | N/A |
| Career | 32.22% | 74.42% | <0.0001*** |
| Updated content | 32.22% | 66.67% | <0.0001*** |
| Consumer education | 24.44% | 66.67% | <0.0001*** |
| Customer testimonials | 18.89% | 23.26% | 0.439 |
| Investor information | 13.33% | 9.30% | 0.347 |
| Subbrand content | 7.78 | 3.10 | 0.119 |

^aNA = not applicable** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

insights into the data. Correspondence analysis (CA) is an exploratory multivariate technique that can be used to analyze and interpret the cross-tabulations of categorical data (Hoffman and Franke, 1986). It portrays sets of categorical variables (e.g., content features, industry types) in a joint space usually defined by two dimensions (Greenacre, 1989). We applied the CA technique to the following tabulations between industry types: (1) text information types (Figure 1), (2) multimedia information types (Figure 2), (3) design features (Figure 3), and (4) interactive functions (Figure 4). The dimensions are interpreted according to well-established guidelines. Correspondence analysis was not applied to

loyalist support features and promotion synergy features as many features coded were not used at all, especially by accounting firms.

Text information in brand sites

The five most commonly used content types by drinks and candies firms in descending order were Products/Offerings, Company, Multiple Modes of Contact, FAQ, and Privacy information. The five most commonly used content types by accounting firms in descending order were Products/Offerings, Company, Multiple Modes of Contact, Updated Content, and Consumer Education information.

The Z-test of proportions indicated statistically significant differences between

the two industry types in the use of the following content types: Multiple Modes of Contact, FAQ, Press Coverage, Employment, Updated Content, and Consumer Education. There were no interindustry differences in the two most commonly used content types (Product/Offerings, Company). Similarly, there were no differences in the three least commonly used content types (Customer Testimonials, Investor Information, and Subbrand Content). The differences were found in the content types that were in moderate usage frequency.

Figure 1 shows the Correspondence Analysis result for the cross-tabulations of industry types and the six text types that exhibited significant interindustry differences. Based on the inertia criteria (>0.2 , see Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black, 1998; same criterion used in subsequent CAs), we produced a two-dimensional space that explained 51.7 percent of the variance. The graphical analysis portrays two dimensions: the horizontal dimension on the rich versus sparse use of text information while the vertical dimension differentiates drinks and candies firms from accounting firms. We observe that brand sites of drinks and candies firms tend to be associated with the *absence* of Career, Customer Education, Press Coverage, and Updated Content information. Yet the reverse is true for the brand sites of accounting firms with regard to these four types of information. On the other hand, accounting firms did not seem to be offering much FAQ or Multiple Modes of Contact information in their brand sites. Our conclusion hence is that, compared to drinks and candies firms, accounting firms seem to treat their brand sites as corporate image building platforms where they feature press coverage, career information for job candidates, updated content, and consumer education materials—all of

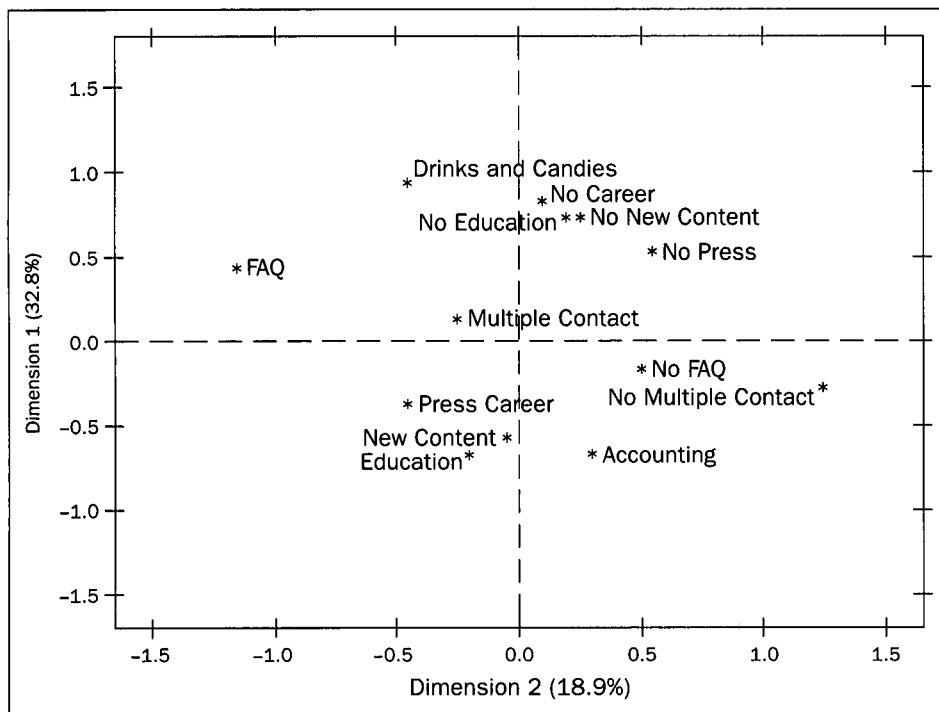


Figure 1 Correspondence Analysis of Selected Text Information and Industry Types

which are aimed at creating a positive corporate image among key stakeholders, e.g., customers, new media, community visitors (e.g., job seekers), etc.

Multimedia information

Table 3 shows the five most commonly used multimedia content types by drinks and candies firms: Picture of Product,

Picture of Employee, Picture of Customer, Animation, and Audio (in descending order). The five most commonly used multimedia content types by accounting firms in descending order were Picture of Employee, Animation, Picture of Customer, Audio, and Video.

The Z-test of proportions detected statistically significant differences between the two industry types in the use of the following multimedia content types: Picture of Employee, Audio, TV Commercial, and Picture of Endorser. On the other hand, we found that the extent of usage of the following multimedia tools was not significantly different between the two industries: Picture of Customer, Animation, and Video.

Figure 2 showed the CA result of the industry type with three multimedia information types showing significant inter-industry differences (Picture of Endorser was not included as none of the accounting firms was using it). Two dimensions can be observed with 63.3 percent of variance explained: the horizontal dimension differentiates rich multimedia usage from sparse use of multimedia; the vertical dimension differentiates drinks and candies firms from accounting firms. A distinct feature of this graph is that the use of Picture of Employee was closely associated with brand sites of accounting firms, but not those of drinks and candies firms, supporting the notion that online service brands need to build tangibility through communication cues such as employee pictures.

TABLE 3
Multimedia Content

| Information Type | Energy Drinks and Candy N = 90 | Accounting Firms N = 129 | p-Value of Two-Sample z-Test of Proportions |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Picture of product | 96.67% | N/A ^a | N/A |
| Picture of employee | 51.11% | 75.19% | 0.0002*** |
| Picture of customer | 35.56% | 29.46% | 0.341 |
| Animation | 31.11% | 40.31% | 0.164 |
| Audio | 18.89% | 7.75% | 0.014** |
| Video | 10% | 6.20% | 0.301 |
| TV commercial | 8.89% | 0.78% | <0.0001*** |
| Picture of endorser | 6.67 | 0 | 0.003*** |

^aNA = not applicable

** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

Interface design

The six most commonly used site design features (see Table 4) by drinks and candies firms in descending order were Brand Logo, Online Shopping Functionality, Search Function, Site Map, Drop-Down Menu, and Flash Introduction. The five most commonly used design features by

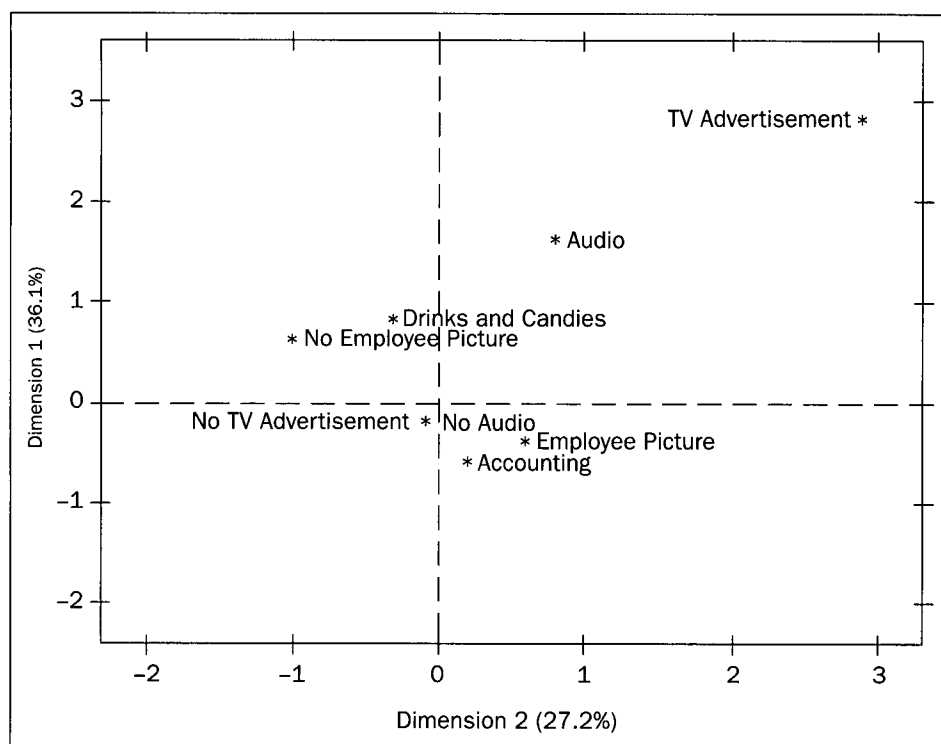


Figure 2 Correspondence Analysis of Selected Multimedia Information and Industry Types

TABLE 4
Interface Design

| Items | Energy Drinks and Candy N = 90 | Accounting Firms N = 129 | p-Value of Two-Sample z-Test of Proportions |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Brand logo | 98.99% | 95.35% | 0.143 |
| Online shopping | 58.89% | 6.2% | <0.0001*** |
| Search | 30% | 43.41% | 0.044** |
| Site map | 27.78% | 35.66% | 0.220 |
| Drop-down menu | 20% | 35.66% | 0.012** |
| Flash intro | 14.44% | 21.71% | 0.175 |
| Pop-up | 4.44% | 0% | 0.016** |
| Navigation | 1 34.44% | 1 33.33% | N/A ^a |
| | 2 24.44% | 2 35.66% | |
| | 3 15.66% | 3 13.95% | |
| | 7 22.22% | 7 12.40 | |

^aNA = not applicable

p < 0.05; *p < 0.01.

accounting firms in descending order were Brand Logo, Search Function, Site Map, Drop-Down Menu, and Flash Introduction. The Z-test of proportions showed statistically significant differences between the two industry types in the use of the following design features: Search Function, Online Shopping Functionality, Drop-Down Menu, and Pop-Ups. On the other hand, there were no significant differences in Brand Logo, Site Map, and Flash Introduction.

Figure 3 showed the CA result of the industry-type data with three site design features with significant interindustry differences (Pop-Up was not included as none of the accounting firms was using it). The graphical analysis depicts two dimensions with 70.5 percent of variance explained: the horizontal dimension on the rich versus sparse use of major website design features (e.g., search) while the vertical dimension differentiates drinks and candies firms from accounting firms. A conspicuous feature of this graph is that the use of Search and Drop-Down Menu were closely associated with brand sites of accounting firms while Online Shopping Functionality was closely related to the brand sites of drinks and candies firms. This shows that accounting firms sense a need to generate strong information organization capability in their brand sites whereas drinks and candies firms are more enthusiastic about exploiting the sales potentials of their brand sites.

Loyalist support

The notion that brand sites could serve as a platform for supporting brand loyalists as advocated by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) did not seem to fare well among brand sites for either drinks and candies manufacturers or accounting firms—as four of the five coded items had low frequency of occurrences (see Table 5); the only exception was History (79 percent) for drinks

Accounting firms sense a need to generate strong information organization capability in their brand sites whereas drinks and candies firms are more enthusiastic about exploiting the sales potentials of their brand sites.

and candies manufacturers. Significant interindustry differences were detected for Fan Club, Bulletin Board, Collectibles, and History—with drinks and candies manufacturers showing a commanding lead using these functions in their brand sites to connect with their loyal customers. Our finding here suggests that there is still great potential for firms to do more in cultivating brand loyalists online.

Promotion synergy

Using brand sites as a facilitating medium for running cross-promotions, while an at-

tractive idea, was found to be used infrequently among either type of companies (Table 6). The most frequently used tool was Publicity by the brand sites of drink and candies firms and an Email Newsletter by accounting firms' brand sites. The only significant interindustry difference was observed for Promotion Entry that was used much more by drinks and candies manufacturers. This finding indicates that both industries were quite lagging in exploiting the synergistic effect of brand sites with offline promotions. This is probably more critical for drinks and

candies manufacturers that have a higher propensity to run offline promotions.

Interactivity

With a few exceptions (e.g., Contact Form), interactive functions were not widely used by either types of companies (Table 7). A number of interesting interindustry differences were observed. We found that drinks and candies manufacturers tended to use Online Games, New-Product Suggestion, Virtual Reality, and Live Chat more often than accounting firms. On the other hand, accounting firms appeared to be relying more on Downloads and Interactive Job Placement to stimulate online user interactions.

Figure 4 delineates the two-dimensional correspondence analysis (55 percent of variance explained) result for industry types and interactive functions that are significant and present in both industries. The horizontal dimension seems to differentiate rich interactivity from sparse use of interactivity features in brand sites while the vertical dimension differentiates drinks and candies manufacturers from accounting firms. We infer that the accounting firms tended to use Interactive Job Placement and Download in their brand sites whereas drinks and candies firms seemed to utilize Virtual Reality and Online Games more. The discovery here suggests that accounting firms use their brand sites primarily as corporate-image building vehicles or virtual information sources while drinks and candies firms are keen in exploiting the entertainment aspects of customer interactions in relationship building.

In summary, our results rendered clear answers to our research questions. The implications of these results are discussed in the next section.

DISCUSSION

Using a web content analysis technique, this study identifies and analyzes

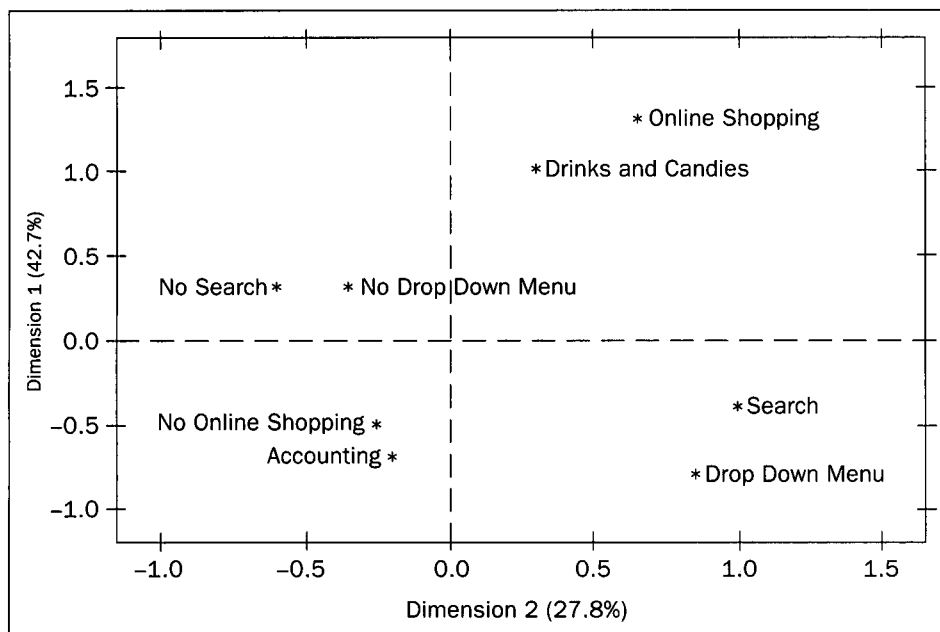


Figure 3 Correspondence Analysis of Design Features and Industry Types

Accounting firms use their brand sites primarily as corporate-image building vehicles or virtual information sources while drinks and candies firms are keen in exploiting the entertainment aspects of customer interactions in relationship building.

important aspects of the content, function, and design of brand sites along six dimensions: text information, multimedia information, interface design, loyalist sup-

port, promotion synergy, and interactivity. We also examined whether the usage of brand sites was different between physical products and services. Our results

show that companies are beginning to find new ways to enrich their brand sites, but they may not be using them to the fullest potential. In particular, we found that companies may be especially lacking in exploiting the potential of brand sites in building a positive experience through interactivity, cultivating loyal customers, and supporting cross-channel promotions. Nonetheless, we did uncover many interesting and innovative brand-building tools. We illustrate a few exemplary brand site applications below.

Brand sites for physical goods manufacturers

For physical goods (i.e., drinks and candies) manufacturers, we found that brand sites provided many fruitful channels to stimulate user-to-user interactions and to build a bond with customers. For instance, Bawls Guarana (www.bawls.com), a new caffeine developed by a college graduate in the United States, set up a section called "Fans" in its brand site with pictures of fans, BAWLS event, message boards (Got a Story, General, Tell Us Your Thoughts). A typical testimonial said—"... Love the product! ... I got personalized NY plates that said BAWLZ. ..."

Another brewing soft drink company, Reeds Inc. (www.reedsgingerbrew.com), set up a "Letters" section to display customers' testimonials and a "Vote" section that also served as "survey/feedback" for this company. In the Download section of Ganong Bros' site (www.ganong.com), users could "... download corporate brand logo or Canadian maple leaf images for use as desktop images." For Lindt Maître Chocolatier, its TV commercial was featured on its brand site (www.lindt.com). This commercial vividly built up the Lindt brand values: "... passion for chocolate, quality, Swissness and tradition ..."

On the whole, physical goods manufacturers are using their brand sites

TABLE 5
Loyalist Support

| Items | Drinks and Candies N = 90 | Accounting Firms N = 129 | p-Value of Two-Sample z-Test of Proportions |
|------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| History | 78.89% | 37.21% | <0.0001*** |
| Collectibles | 24.44% | 0 | <0.0001*** |
| Recommend option | 8.89% | 3.88% | 0.122 |
| Fan club | 6.67% | 0 | 0.003*** |
| Bulletin board | 3.33% | 0 | 0.037** |

** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 6
Cross Promotion/Synergy

| Items | Drinks and Candies N = 90 | Accounting Firms N = 129 | p-Value of Two-Sample z-Test of Proportions |
|------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Publicity | 25.56% | 17.83% | 0.167 |
| Promotion entry | 16.67% | 0 | <0.0001*** |
| Email newsletter | 15.56% | 22.48% | 0.204 |
| Sponsorship | 6.67% | 6.98% | 0.929 |
| Online coupon | 4.44% | 1.55% | 0.197 |

*** $p < 0.01$.

TABLE 7
Usage of Interactive Functions across Two Industries

| Items | Drinks and Candies N = 90 | Accounting Firms N = 129 | p-Value of Two-Sample z-Test of Proportions |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Contact form | 47.78% | 51.16% | 0.622 |
| Personalization option | 20.00% | 24.81% | 0.404 |
| Games | 16.67% | 0.78% | <0.0001*** |
| Download | 13.33% | 30.23% | 0.004*** |
| Feedback/survey | 12.22% | 13.95% | 0.710 |
| Interactive job placement | 11.11% | 39.53% | <0.0001*** |
| New-product suggestion | 5.56% | 0 | 0.007*** |
| Live chat | 5.56% | 0 | 0.007*** |
| E-greeting card | 4.44% | 0 | 0.016** |
| Virtual reality | 4.44% | 0.78% | 0.07* |
| Recommendation agent | 1.11% | 0% | 0.230 |
| Online diagnostics | N/A ^a | N/A | N/A |

^aNA = not applicable

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

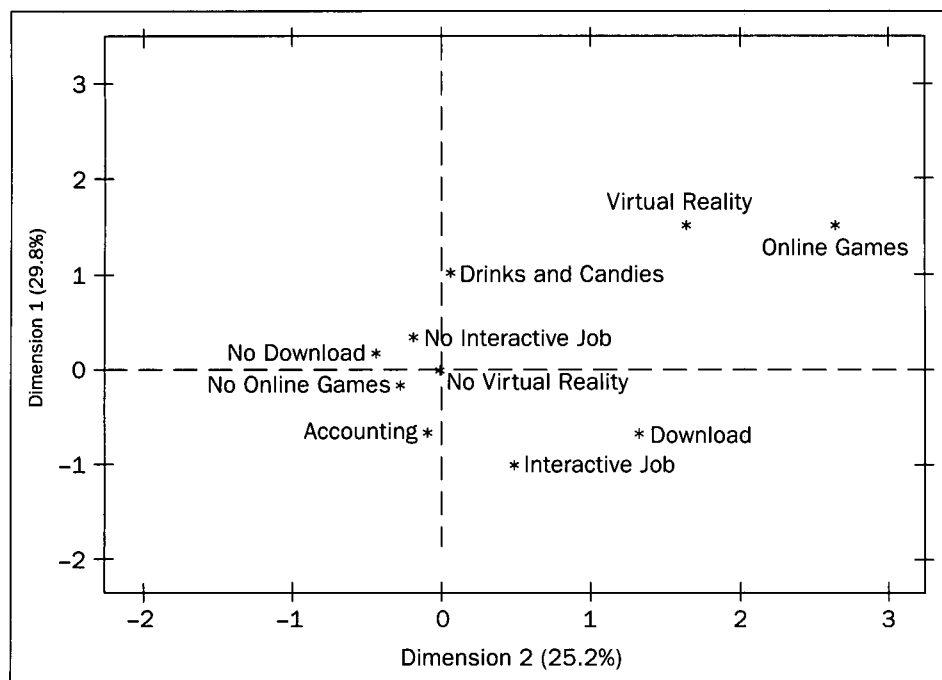


Figure 4 Correspondence Analysis of Interactive Features and Industry Types

primarily to stimulate sales and also to build relationship with customers through online interactions.

Brand sites for service firms

In the accounting services category, firms are resorting to the rendering of detailed content to better educate customers about their services, and to the implementation of innovative features to build closer relationship with customers. Both approaches were intended to reduce consumers' psychological barriers associated with the intangibility and perceived risks of service brands. Some of the distinct tools that have been pursued include Customer Education, Picture of Employees, Use of Drop-Down Menu to allow easy access to large amounts of information, and Download of additional materials.

For instance, at the website for Larson, Allen, Weishair & Co., LLP (www.larsonallen.com), images of smiling, confident-looking accountants were prominently displayed along with its brand logo on the top of every page. The company's brand website also offered a regularly distributed electronic magazine (EFFECT) to educate its clients about issues of relevance to them, e.g., "Under 40, you still need an estate plan." Lastly, because it strives to offer a comprehensive array of information to its customers in an easy-to-digest manner, the company utilized the drop-down menu design feature, e.g., visitors would be shown the following four content areas by clicking the "Media" button: New Releases, Our Brand, Our Brand EFFECT Magazine. In general, service firms operate their brand sites primarily to provide detailed information about their services and also to fortify their corporate image among key stakeholders, e.g., customers, news media, and community visitors.

Implications for brand managers and web marketers

Ten years of online advertising research has confirmed the importance of the internet as a major source of information on brands (Hollis, 2005). The website of a brand could provide greater contextual information and facilitate higher users' interactions with the brand. Therefore, designing effective brand websites contributes significantly to firms' brand equity building efforts (Argyriou, Kitchen, and Melewar, 2006).

The first practical implication to online marketers and brand managers from our study is to enhance the number of interactive functions in their brand sites. Greater interactivity promotes greater brand learning through better information assimilation (Erdem et al., 1999) and could help companies forge cognitive and emotional bonds with their brand users (Steenkamp and Geyskens, 2006). Yet, the present study found that the application of interactive functions in brand websites was still quite limited. Thus, brand sites that boost their levels of interactivity can fulfill their online brand building missions more effectively.

The next gap uncovered by this study was that firms' brand sites were not doing enough in catering to brands' loyalists, despite the fact that many of the visitors to brand websites were loyalists (Flores, 2004). To address this deficiency, we recommend that brand websites add functions or content that can further enhance loyalists' commitment to brands, such as fan clubs, brand souvenirs, or brand recommendations.

We also found that brand websites were underutilizing their potential to synthesize online and offline marketing programs (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). Toward this goal, brand websites can be enhanced by adding such functions—e.g., distributing coupons that are redeemable in offline

stores, helping consumers locate offline stores, or providing detailed information about offline sponsorship programs.

Lastly, this study clearly demonstrates the different approaches used for setting up product versus service brand websites. Consistently, service brand websites were more likely to feature information (including multimedia content) that could bolster the trustworthiness of firms or educate consumers about the services. These functions served to reduce the psychological barriers and perceived risks associated with service brands (Grove, Carlson, and Dorsch, 2002). On the other hand, product brand websites leaned toward utilizing interactive functions (e.g., brand-themed advergames) that could foster consumers' intimate relationship with brands, a recommendation echoed in a recent survey on the state-of-art usage of brand websites among consumer packaged goods companies (*eMarketer*, 2006).

Limitations and future research

There are two limitations with this study. First, though we have examined all brands in one product category and one service category, the differences discovered in brand sites usage between drinks and candies firms and accounting firms may be due to the peculiarities associated with the two industries. Future research needs to look at different product or service categories in order to be able to generalize findings from the present research. For instance, the service category we studied (accounting firms) was utilitarian/functional in nature, but there are other service types that may be hedonic in nature (e.g., brand fashion design services such as www.verawang.com); these two types might be structured differently in terms of content, function, and design elements. Future research might be better served focusing on the different types of

services and their relative use of design and content elements. However, because this is the initial study in this area, including multiple types of differences among services is beyond the scope of this article.

Second, as with any other content analysis study, we do not know consumers' actual evaluations of the specific elements of brand sites even though previous studies have demonstrated the branding effectiveness of brand sites (e.g., Ha and Chan-Olmsted, 2004). Further studies can pinpoint the branding effectiveness of specific content, function, and design features of brand sites using other study approaches such as controlled experiments.

Our study has direct implications for companies who intend to bolster their brand image and boost online marketing effectiveness through the unique online advertising form of brand sites. Consumers are sure to notice poorly structured websites that do not address their expectations, which could lead to erosion of brand image and drop in future sales. If a company finds itself lagging behind its competitor in terms of website content, function, and design features, it needs to carefully evaluate whether this results in a competitive disadvantage. With the continuing development of e-commerce and internet marketing, we expect the importance of brand sites will continue to grow and more research on this area is definitely called for. **JAR**

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WENYU DOU (Ph.D., marketing, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) is an associate professor of marketing at City University of Hong Kong. His research interests include internet advertising, marketing in China, and client-agency relationship. He has published in journals such as the *Journal of Advertising Research*, the *Journal of Business Research*, the *Journal of Advertising*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, the *International Marketing Review*, and the *European Journal of Marketing*.

SANDEEP KRISHNAMURTHY (Ph.D., marketing, University of Arizona) is an associate professor of E-commerce and marketing at the University of Washington, Bothell. He is the author of a successful MBA E-commerce textbook—*E-Commerce Management: Text and Cases* and has edited two books, *Contemporary Research in E-Marketing: Volumes I, II*. His academic research has been published in journals such as *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (OBHDP)*, *Marketing Letters*, the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *International Marketing Review*, *Knowledge, Technology & Policy*, and *Business Horizons*.

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